

id: 169673
date: 9/12/2008 17:57
refid: 08PARIS1717
origin: Embassy Paris
classification: SECRET//NOFORN
destination: 08PARIS1703
header:
VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHFR #1717 2561757
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 121757Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4295
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

----- header ends -----

S E C R E T PARIS 001717

NOFORN

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2018
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PINS, PINR, FR, SY, LE
SUBJECT: FRENCH BELIEVE THAT ASSASSINATION OF SYRIAN
GENERAL SLEIMAN WAS AN INSIDE JOB

REF: PARIS 1703

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Kathy Allegrone
for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

1. (S/NF) As Washington readers and others ponder French policy toward Syria, and as an expansion of para 3 in reftel, we pass along the previously unreported views of two of our GOF interlocutors from meetings in late August on the mysterious assassination earlier in the month of Syrian brigadier general Muhammad Sleiman and its potential significance for the regime of Syrian President Asad. NEA adviser at the French presidency Boris Boillon, on August 20, asserted that the killing seemed to be some sort of inside job. He flatly rejected the notion that the Israelis had taken out Sleiman, particularly the theory that a sniper had shot him on a boat situated somewhere off the coast of the Syrian coastal city of Tartus. Boillon claimed that French information was that the hit was more "classic" and "mafia-like" with police stopping traffic in the immediate vicinity, bodyguards looking the other way, and the assailant pumping a slug into Sleiman's head.

2. (S/NF) When asked how he interpreted the killing,

Boillon said that several theories presented themselves, the only common denominator of which was internecine rivalry in the entourage close to Bashar al-Asad. Although Bashar's disgruntled brother-in-law and sidelined head of Syrian Military Intelligence 'Asif Shawkat seems to have the most compelling motive for knocking off someone he might have regarded as a rival and source of his reputed downfall in recent months, Boillon thought Bashar's brother Mahir was a more likely suspect. Boillon described Mahir as ambitious, a bit of a wild man, and determined to increase his power and influence within the inner circle. Inasmuch as Mahir might have contrived to bring down Shawkat, he might also have decided to take out his next key rival, Sleiman, in a more permanent way.

3. (S/NF) Boillon further referred the related possibility that Mahir had rubbed out Sleiman in the same way he might have rubbed out Hizballah leader 'Imad Mughniyah) possibly even on Bashar's orders. The latter explanation would tie in with the notion of cleaning house as Syria needed to present a more respectable image while it pursued its rapprochement with France and/or needed to remove those who "knew too much" (in the case of Sleiman, about the clandestine nuclear program). Of course, Boillon added, one could never rule out the notion that Sleiman's death was related to a bloody struggle over control of lucrative criminal activities.

4. (S/NF) Pouille on August 28, meanwhile, was less forthcoming than Boillon in terms of offering interpretations of Sleiman's death, but he was equally categorical in disputing the theory that the Israelis were responsible. He cited the French ambassador in Damascus as his source for the contention that the killing was an inside job to "settle old scores" as well as conveniently get rid of someone who might have information of value to the UNIIIC on Lebanon or to the IAEA on Syria's nuclear program.

5. (S/NF) Comment: We offer these insights, some of which have appeared in abridged form in the French press, less for the light they may shed on Sleiman's assassination than they do about the French perception of the Asad regime. Indeed, Boillon's rundown of the various theories sounded like he had recently read a finished French intelligence assessment of the situation. Both Boillon and Pouille sought, in these conversations, to stress that France does not judge the Asad regime dangerously unstable or Asad's grip on power slipping. Nonetheless, they believe that the internal situation is fragile enough to warrant concern and a nuanced approach. We believe this could partly account for Sarkozy's decision to move so quickly to cultivate his personal relationship with Bashar and to "gamble" (as the French media have put it) on Bashar's willingness to change course on Lebanon, peace with Israel, and even Syria's relationship with Iran. For what it may be worth, former Lebanese military intelligence chief Johnny Abdo recently contended the assassination was an inside job and pointed to the absence of the sort of mass arrests inside Syria that would normally accompany this type

of killing by criminal or non-regime elements. End comment

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:France>

STAPLETON

=====CABLE ENDS=====